

Kiss your GPS units goodbye.. China destroys Satellite with missile

Source: <http://sci.tech-archive.net/Archive/sci.geo.satellite-nav/2007-01/msg00359.html>

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 - *Date:* 18 Jan 2007 17:07:30 -0800
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WASHINGTON (CNN) — China last week successfully used a missile to destroy an orbiting satellite, U.S. government officials told CNN on Thursday, in a test that could undermine relations with the West and pose a threat to satellites important to the U.S. military.

According to a spokesman for the National Security Council, the ground-based, medium-range ballistic missile knocked an old Chinese weather satellite from its orbit about 537 miles above Earth. The missile carried a "kill vehicle" and destroyed the satellite by ramming it.

The test took place on January 11. (Watch why the U.S. has protested the missile strike)

Aviation Week and Space Technology first reported the test: "Details emerging from space sources indicate that the Chinese Feng Yun 1C (FY-1C) polar orbit weather satellite launched in 1999 was attacked by an asat (anti-satellite) system launched from or near the Xichang Space Center."

A U.S. official, who would not agree to be identified, said the event was the first successful test of the missile after three failures.

The official said that U.S. "space tracking sensors" confirmed that the satellite is no longer in orbit and that the collision produced "hundreds of pieces of debris," that also are being tracked.

The United States logged a formal diplomatic protest.

"We are aware of it and we are concerned, and we made it known," said White House spokesman Tony Snow.

Several U.S. allies, including Canada and Australia, also have registered protests.

Under a space policy authorized by President Bush in August, the United States asserts a right to "freedom of action in space" and says it will "deter others from either impeding those rights or developing

Kiss your GPS units goodbye.. China destroys Satellite with missile capabilities intended to do so."

The policy includes the right to "deny, if necessary, adversaries the use of space capabilities hostile to U.S. national interests."

Low Earth-orbit satellites have become indispensable for U.S. military communications, GPS navigation for smart bombs and troops, and for real-time surveillance. The Chinese test highlights the satellites' vulnerability.

"If we, for instance, got into a conflict over Taiwan, one of the first things they'd probably do would be to shoot down all of our lower Earth-orbit spy satellites, putting out our eyes," said John Pike of globalsecurity.org, a Web site that compiles information on worldwide security issues.

"The thing that is surprising and disturbing is that [the Chinese] have chosen this moment to demonstrate a military capability that can only be aimed at the United States," he said.